

Securing Cemetery Plot Gates

The theft of cemetery art such as statues, fences, and other artwork is common and profitable. Just how profitable is difficult to determine, but for years the media have periodically brought the problem to the attention of the public. For example, a 1996 Associated Press article in the Abilene, TX, Reporter-News quoted detective Richard Peavey, “A dealer can buy a piece for \$200 or \$300, or even go to a cemetery and get it himself for nothing, and then turn around and sell it for \$1,700-\$1,800 or more.”¹ His investigation found a thriving black market for statues, marble urns, and wrought-iron fences in northeastern Texas. In 1998, USA Today reported on the newest craze, “cemetery chic,” a design fad for stolen cemetery artwork and fences. The good news, at least for New Orleans, LA, was that there had been arrests and the recovery of a hoard of stolen goods, all from the “Cities of the Dead.”² A year later, Preservation News highlighted the progress made by New Orleans in curbing the “widespread . . . brazen [and] lucrative” theft of graveyard items. The article reported that the New England Cemetery Association was encouraging owners of plots to report thefts, about the only advice that was offered.³

The picket top or gate finial partially covers the cemetery gate eye, preventing the gate from being lifted off of its hinges.



Not all communities, however, have been as fortunate as New Orleans. In South Carolina, for example, police tracked a gang of fence thieves, that hit at least five cemeteries, some during broad daylight, over a 2-month period. The route could be traced on a map, but police were always just a city behind the thieves.⁴ At one cemetery in South Carolina a 200-year-old English gate was stolen and, in spite of a \$1,000 reward, was never recovered.⁵

The general agreement is that iron gates are easy targets. Many historic cemeteries are isolated, rarely visited, and poorly maintained. Even in cemeteries where visitors and oversight are common, gates can be quickly removed, placed in a pickup, and the thief long gone before anyone notices or can react. Gates also are profitable, being sold for anywhere from several hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on the style, condition, and market. And it appears that the chance of getting caught seems rare — the New Orleans experience notwithstanding. Gates are rarely photographed or marked, so proving ownership can be impossible.

While there are no simple solutions, there are steps that cemetery caretakers can take to reduce theft and improve chances of recovery. Most of the preventative steps involve a common practice, “hardening the target,” making it less vulnerable to attack or theft. But prevention should also be coupled with appropriate documentation of gates. Should the worst occur, good, detailed photographs of the gate will not only help to identify the gates if recovered, but can also put pressure on those who might accept the object, thus making it more difficult for the thief to dispose of the gate.

Hardening the Target

Probably fewer than 5 percent of the gates that I’ve seen in nearly 20 years of research have been secured. In a few cases the pins are so corroded that removal would be difficult. In a few other cases the design included some device to prevent or inhibit the gate’s removal. But most can be easily removed, with theft often requiring only a few seconds.

Certainly the first step is careful examination of a gate to determine how (and how easily) it can be removed. One of the largest manufacturers of the late 19th century — still in business today — is Stewart Iron Works.⁶ Virtually, all of their gates were secured using what is called a drop rod, placed through pins or sockets on both the gate and the gatepost. Removing the gate simply involves removing the drop rod. Many other gates use a simple hook and eye combination, allowing the gate to drop into position; removing them is just as easy. Very few gates have closed hinges, where the design inhibits removal. Others, while having hook and eye hinges, have additional modifications to make removal more difficult. The photograph on the previous page reveals that a picket top (probably screwed onto the top rail) partially covers the gate eye, making it impossible to remove the gate.

Any effort to prevent theft should be reversible and should respect the historic fabric. In other words, while welding a gate shut would dramatically reduce its potential for theft, the fence's historic character would be dramatically altered. Cutting, drilling, and other nonreversible approaches should also be avoided.

For gates with drop rods, one technique to reduce the ease of theft is to weld or braze a bar to the terminal end of the rod to prevent its removal.⁷ Defeat of this technique can be accomplished only by cutting the end of the drop rod or by removing the welded or brazed bar. Efforts to violently remove the gate, while typically unsuccessful, will cause collateral damage to the gate, gatepost, or adjacent fence section. This technique can be effective for gates with hooks, assuming that the hook or pin projects high enough above or below the eye. While welding or brazing bars on both the upper and lower hinges achieves the best results, even modification of one will significantly harden the target, making theft less likely.

Does such an approach alter the historic fabric? Is it reversible? The answer depends on the care and sensitivity of the approach. Poor workmanship, coupled with an oversize bar, is likely to detract from the original appearance. Welds can be removed, although admittedly

they do alter the original drop rod, since welding relies on melting the metal. Nevertheless, it can be argued that under certain circumstances, such as an area with a high incidence of past theft or a rural area where oversight is not possible, welding is far preferable to losing the gate.

In cases where welding may be impossible or inappropriate, another approach is to install stainless steel aircraft cable with ferrules to create a loop joining the gate and gate post. Appropriate diameters are 1/8-inch (3 mm) and 3/16-inch (5 mm). Larger diameters are typically difficult to form and far more obvious. Smaller diameters provide significantly reduced security. While this approach is more intrusive (and visible), it is reversible. It is also, admittedly, less secure since good cutters can gradually work their way through the cable. The point is that the cable slows the would-be gate thief just as a lock on a door slows a house thief. An alternative, especially for short-term use, is vinyl-coated zinc cable, which is commonly available at hardware stores. Using vinyl-coated zinc 3/16-inch cable, a gate can be secured for as little as \$2.00 in materials.

Finally, it is possible to use locks to secure gates. At times the gate includes a hasp or other locking device that is still functional. A limitation, of course, is that maintenance workers are then unable to enter the plot for mowing and other activities. Under some circumstances removable shackle padlocks may be used, if the shackle is sufficiently large to attach the gate to the gatepost. Keyed cable locks also might be effective. These are similar to aircraft cables, but are thicker and more secure, and are keyed for easy installation and removal. While many of these mechanisms offer exceptional security, they

An example of closed hinges, where design inhibits removal of a cemetery gate. Unfortunately in this case, the hinge post has been disconnected from the top and bottom rails, and the gate is unsecured.



are also rather intrusive, detracting from the gate and its setting.

Preservation may sometimes involve removing a gate from the cemetery for safe storage, although this should be viewed as a short-term measure, not as a permanent solution. Not only is safe storage difficult to find, but removed from its context, gates often lose their historic significance. It is worth noting that gates that are already damaged or no longer properly set are particularly vulnerable to theft. At times they are crudely secured to a more stable fence section using baling wire, although more often they are simply leaned up against a tree. Loose gates should be carefully secured until they can be repaired and reset.

Recording and Marking

Like any piece of valuable property, cemetery gates should be carefully recorded. The best approach is to take good quality photographs, showing the fence against a neutral backdrop, complete with both horizontal and vertical scales. Closeups should be taken of special details, such as name plates, unusual decorations, or evidence of previous damage or repairs. The goal should be to capture images that are sufficiently detailed to allow identification of the gate should it be stolen and later recovered. The photographs should be treated like any museum documentation and carefully retained. Negatives should be stored separate from prints to ensure an additional degree of long-term preservation.

Some manufacturers today discreetly number individual gates. The purpose of the serial number is to help track stolen gates and return them to their owners. Even old gates may be marked with a distinctive number, perhaps the social security number of the plot owner or the Federal Employer Identification Number of the cemetery. Electric engraving tools can be used to etch numbers into the gate, perhaps under the bottom channel rail or on the side rail against the gatepost. Another alternative is to use a welding bead to place a number on the gate in an inconspicuous location. While both approaches disfigure the gate, this may be appropriate if the risk is sufficiently high.

Finally, caretakers should report all theft and vandalism to the local police or sheriff's department. There is little chance that unreported items will ever be returned. Moreover, by reporting the loss, you begin to help the local

authorities detect patterns in crime that may ultimately lead to arrests. In addition, if you have good photographs of a stolen gate, post notices of the theft, send copies to antique dealers Statewide, and issue press releases with the story. Send information to local and Statewide historic preservation organizations, and offer a reward. These steps help to attract attention to the theft and may make it more difficult for the thief to find a buyer, at least locally.

Protecting resources in historic cemeteries requires some thought and advance planning. Once items are stolen it's too late to contemplate improving security or making changes. Like all disaster planning, take proactive steps to ensure that your cemetery is protected and preserved.

Notes

- ¹ "Cemetery Objects in Texas Finding a Thriving Black Market," *Abilene (TX) Reporter-News*, June 10, 1996.
- ² Maria Puente, "New Orleans Officials Work to Make Cemetery Chic a Dying Fad," *USA Today*, June 26, 1998.
- ³ Alita Byrd, "Stealing from the Dead: Arrests in New Orleans Underscore the Breadth of Graveyard Theft Market," *Preservation*, March/April 1999, 19.
- ⁴ "Vandals Steal Ornamental Iron Cemetery Gates," *Columbia, SC, The State*, May 24, 1998.
- ⁵ "A Reward Offered for Return of Historic Gate," *Columbia, SC, The State*, February 25, 1998.
- ⁶ Stewart Iron Works Company, P.O. Box 2612, Covington, KY 41012, telephone (859) 431-1985. They not only produced an extensive line of fences and gates, but also sold to a number of other firms which applied their own name, including Cincinnati Iron Fence Company and Sears Roebuck and Company.
- ⁷ Welding is a method of joining metals by melting and fusing the two pieces. In contrast, brazing connects the two pieces by using a small amount of alloy metal that melts and flows between the two close-fitting parts. One benefit of brazing is that it is less likely to warp or damage of the material being joined. Done correctly, a brazed joint is often equal to a welded joint. The disadvantage is that brazing requires that the two pieces fit together tightly.

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